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ABSTRACT

The importance of play and its contributions to the intellectual, social, psychomotor, and emotional growth of the child is just now being recognized and day care teachers are regularly required to justify the inclusion of play and games in programs for young children. Two types of justification are commonly heard: the nondescriptive and the intuitive. Nondescriptive justification is personal, variable, often circular, and is exemplified through such statements as "play serves recreational purposes." Intuitive justification develops after extensive involvement with children. An example of intuitive justification is evident in the statement "by playing, children learn how to cooperate, interact and socialize." While play can also be viewed as a response to unconscious conflict, deprivation, or the need for gaining mastery over the environment, this maturational view, based on content classifications such as motor, intellectual, emotional, and sensory play, has the limitations of variability, broadness, lack of communicability, and ease of misinterpretation. Early childhood teachers find it difficult to explain all forms of play in this manner. Despite the need for further research, Piaget's rationale for the importance of play can be used independently or in conjunction with nondescriptive or intuitive justifications. (Piaget's theory of play is reviewed and strengths and advantages of his view of play are pointed out.) (Author/RH)

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PLAY AND GOOD PROGRAMS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN:

A PIAGET JUSTIFICATION

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Play and Good Programs for Young Children: A Piaget Justification

The world of early childhood programs is a milieu of children's spontaneous activities on a day to day basis and over long periods of time. Historically, these activities, called play or "gamesmanship", have existed before the time of Plato. However, the importance of play and its contributions to the intellectual, social, and psychomotor and emotional growth of the child is just being recognized (McLoyd, 1980). This recent awareness may be one reason why day care teachers are asked time and time again to justify play and games as a viable part and connected subset of all good programs for young children.

> In reporting on all the various pressures that have now become the constant, day-by-day facts of life in every . . . school, what we begin to see emerging is an important distinction: . . . schools may be "in", but play is "out"! (LeShan, 1973, p. 110)

However, retaining play is a battle. In day care, nursery, kindergarten, and primary grades, teachers continually defend the importance of play as a valuable contribution to the child outside and inside centers and classrooms. In a way it is incredible to believe that play which is the main business of so much of the young child's life requires justification and rationale for its inclusion in the day-to-day activities.

> There were and still are valid reasons for making every effort to re-establish play as a central and significant aspect of life during the preschool years, to say nothing of its meaning in the lives of all human beings of all ages. It is not to be trifled with. (LeShan, 1973, p. 110)

With little understanding about play, justifications for its inclusion into good schools for young children typically fall into two types--the nondescriptive and the intuitive. Both levels of justification have origins in a particular mainstream of psychological thought.

Types of Justification

At the nondescriptive level, the most commonly heard justifications for play are shrouded in cliches, very general comments, "pat" phrases, and often trite and meaningless statements as to its worth and relative merits. Examples of these phrases used in defense of play are: (1) "it creates an awareness of individual and peer relations"; (2) "it develops creativity and imagination"; (3) "it is fun and enjoyable to do"; (4) "it serves recreational purposes"; (5) "it is the 'right' of the four year old child"; (6) "it contributes to intellectual growth"; (7) "it builds large and small muscles"; (8) it is learning to learn"; and (9) "it is the child's work". The source of this justification at the nondescriptive level is mainly introspection (Singer, 1973). By examining their own childhood memories of play, adults build support for it based upon subjective feelings, observations, and recollections of the pleasurable. Justification built at the nondescriptive level is purely personal, variable, and often times quite circular. Just as childhood experiences and opportunities for play vary across children, so the arguments vary across adults for play at this level of justification.

The level of intuition is a more sophisticated level and develops after years of involvement with young children. At this level, examples include: (1) "spontaneous activities give meaning to a child's present and future life"; (2) "they are important because they are safety valves for young children to blow off excess energy"; (3) "play is interesting to the child and therefore

acceptable"; (4) "they help develop large and small muscles"; (5) "what else do "little people" do other than play"; (6) "through play, children develop thinking, problem solving, and imagining"; (7) "children learn how to cooperate, interact, and socialize"; and (8) "play is significant for later life."

Whether at the nondescriptive or intuitive levels, the reasons advanced for the inclusion of play, if examined closely, lack clarity, use a bandwagon effect for persuasion, and offer little convincing support to the policy and decision makers of the school. These statements also rarely convince the parents who support and finance the school. These justifications are analogous with folklore suggested by the titles, "The Magic Years of the Child" or "The Child's Inherent Right to be Three". Yet, the justifications do help somewhat to support the inclusion of play in center and school activities. However, the important question of ". . . why children and/or people play . . ." is still largely unanswered . . . and the question goes on being asked and asked . . . !

Much of the trite, pat, and intuitively-based reasons for spontaneous activities of young children for the most part can be described as a feeling that growth and development is a maturational unfolding process that continues to blossom as the children advance in age. This view of the "natural unfolding" supports play of young children as an expression of personal feelings, emotions, conscious and unconscious.

Characteristic of the maturational view is an awareness that children engage in motor play (based upon running, hopping, galloping, climbing, etc.), intellectual play (founded upon curiosity, imagination, etc.), emotional play (based upon the differentiation and integration of personality factors such as noncompliance) or sensorial experiences (related to auditory, visual, kinesthetic-tactile, and other senses). These are content classifications of

play and games (Piaget, 1962). The behavior that children display in play are grouped into various units of behavior which puts them into action. For example, because the actions of running, hopping, galloping, etc., require motor movements--this form of play becomes motor play. This content classification can be further grouped into large motor play (juxtaposed to small motor play) by actions of cutting, pasting, tearing, etc.--all of which use fine motor actions. Play behaviors categorized by content is quite variable and depends upon the amount or equality of the content displayed by a child in play at any one time. For example, intellectual play can become social, emotional play, or sensorial experiences depending upon the amount of intellectual compared to social, emotional, or sensorial behavior employed in the actions. Using content groupings, others are: science play, water play, sand-table play, woodworking play, and on and on . . . .

The main drawback to play as content categories is variability, broadness, lack of communication, and misinterpretation. Essentially, play as content lacks precision, and depends upon whether the adult is operating at nondescriptive or intuitive levels of justification. Content categories most seriously break down when children at play engage in symbolism and social roles based upon verbal expressions of thought. This problem of classification can be solved by grouping and labeling these actions into social levels--dramatic play and socio-dramatic play. However, these classifications show the same problems of all other play classified by content--great variability between and among adults and from moment to moment. Then, too, although content classifications are variable they are also specific. That is play is specific to a function of actions that, at least from a maturational point of view, sees play as a response to unconscious conflict, deprivation, or the need for gaining mastery over the environment.

However, early childhood teachers are hard put to explain all forms of play in this manner. An alternative to viewing and justifying play at non-descriptive and intuitive levels using maturational feelings of unfolding processes, is that suggested by Jean Piaget (1962).

Piaget's View of Play

A more thoroughly constructed idea of the origins and development of play in children was devised by Piaget. Its frame of reference is clearly centered upon cognitive growth (Piaget, 1962). For Piaget, mental structures or schemes of the young child develop in and through a heirarchically organized sequence of invariant stages. These stages are qualitatively different from one another. The difference within and between these cognitive stages of intellectual development are basically qualitative in origin and refer to key characteristics of thinking or knowing indicative of human organisms from birth through 16 years of age and older. According to Piaget, play is an integral part of the development of thinking and knowing. Although recognizing the importance of social and emotional growth, Piaget neither excludes nor denies the existence of these growth processes as some critics charge. Instead, Piaget argues that both social and emotional development contain large segments which are purely cognitive in origin and composition.

For Piaget, play, part of the structural thinking process, evolves from working out two fundamentals of experiencing or adapting. These modes or adaptive actions are assimilative and accommodative; Piaget also uses the terms in a broader sense to apply to intellectual development.

Assimilation is a theoretical concept which "represents an attempt [by the child] to imitate the interact physically with the environment" (Singer, 1975, p. 13). And, it is a process in which the human organism

changes the information it receives in the process of making the data part of the individual's know-how. As information is received from the environment, the child tries to make it a part of him--and he "digests" it.

Accommodation is also a concept and "represents the attempt [by the child] to integrate externally derived percepts or motor actions into a limited number of schemes or differentiated motor and cognitive skills available at a particular age." (Singer, 1973, p. 13) Accommodation is a process of adjustment the human organism must make to the external environment in order to assimilate the information. And, as the child begins taking in environmental information and making it a part of him, his mental structures undergo transformations in the "digestive" act.

According to Piaget, intellectual development is the active interplay between the twin complimentary processes of assimilation and accommodation. When the two processes balance each other, referred to as equilibrium, intellectual adaptation occurs. When the twin complimentary processes are not in balance, adjustment to the object, accommodation, may predominate over assimilation. This results in imitation or mastery. When fitting the impression in with previous experiences and then adapting it to the requirements of the human organism, assimilation predominates. The end result, here, is ludic symbolism, make believe, or symbolic play.

Symbolic play is a way of practicing what the child has already met and come to know. Here the child repeats an activity to understand it. In symbolic play, a child repeats words and sentences time and time again, but here the frame of reference is idiocratic, limited, and rather narrow. In mastery play, the child grasps, and explores an object or situation by picking it up, pushing, pounding, or perhaps rolling it, and the adaptive

responses are limited to and specifically reflected by the object or situation modeled.

However, child's play is assimilative in nature. As the child receives additional opportunities with objects and situations, his schemes become more and more differentiated. As the product of assimilation becomes more realistic, the child's play loses its particular idiocratic and pretend qualities.

Piaget sees no need to assume that play has special instincts or innate impulses that unfold at critical times since he regards play as a product of assimilation. Questions about "emotion", "social development", "motivation", "learning to learn", "the child's right to be three" and other justifications of play are all related and no longer totally separate and isolated from each other.

With the assumption that assimilation is play, two corollaries logically follow. The first corollary is that the child will play at whatever activity he has just acquired. The second one is that while the child is playing, the activity will be characterized by deviations and distortions of reality to suit his individual and situational requirements. In both corollaries, reality is adapted to the child's own requirements and needs relative to repeating actions already mastered.

Piaget's ideas about play are coherent and describe the growth of invariant and successive play activities from using a rattler through make believe in acting out dramas to playing checkers. Essentially, these successive play activities, classified into stages, are characteristic of qualitatively distinct thought structures. The stage-like thinking structures, observed through and in play activities, in reality, parallel Piaget's stages of intellectual development. Just as there are stages in intellectual growth, there are also a number of stages in the development of play activities.

Classification of Piaget's Play

Tied to Piaget's beliefs concerning the development of thought structures of human organisms, content classifications of play are neither stressed nor used. Piaget refuses to view play by content categories because of their extreme variability across time and place, and because categorization by content of necessity depends upon preconceived notions of attributes comprising them. Classification of play, for Piaget, serves as logical explanations of activities without assuming definitions á priori. Instead, Piaget insists that classification of play must be confined to the analysis of thinking structures present in play and to degrees of mental complexity evidenced from play activities. With this view, play activities range from primitive sensorimotor to highly complex social games which are categorized into stages corresponding to levels of intellectual development. These stages are: (1) sensorimotor practice play; (2) symbolic play; and (3) play activities with rules. Constructive and creative play as a transitional level is also included within Piaget's classification system.

Practice Play

Sensorimotor play or function games are characterized by prelanguage. They evolve from the repetition of actions as soon as they become mastered. Developmentally speaking, they arise and first appear during substages, two through five, of the sensorimotor stage of intellectual development and develop during the first 18 months of life. Practice play, as mere excercise, is an action oriented group of varied behaviors that do not modify thinking structures. The sole purpose of sensorimotor practice play is pleasure of function--i.e., "pleasure in being a cause" or "functional pleasure". For instance, the young child having learned to find toys or other objects under

a pillow now removes pillow after pillow from sofas and chairs because this action itself is fun to do, enjoyable, and pleasant. In another example, an older child, who has learned to jump over a stream, now jumps back and forth across the stream again and again because it is pleasurable. Both of these examples of sensorimotor practice play are not repeated out of necessity to acquire new actions or behaviors. The child's purpose is solely the pleasure derived from "removing pillows", "from jumping" or doing other actions. The repetition required to successfully learn the action, becomes sensorimotor practice, or play activities when then repeated with variations. In practice play, neither symbols, make believe, nor group rules are used. The situation which puts the schemes into action, provides reason alone for the repetition of that action.

Functional assimilation or "practice for the sake of practice", accompanied by pleasure of "being the cause" or "feeling the power" are characteristics of the sensorimotor period of intelligence. But, they are found whenever new skills are acquired. Practice play, then, can occur at age 2½, 3, 6, and so on--whenever new skills and objects are used for fun. Adults practice play with newly purchased houses or cars, for example. These objects, at first, are used just for fun or the pleasure they provide at "being the cause". Likewise, adults demonstrate practice play, for instance, when they get new and better jobs. The frequency of sensorimotor practice play, however, decreases as time increases after the individual's acquisition of language.

Whether throwing, pulling, filling, emptying, breaking down objects and putting them together, or driving a new car, if the action already mastered is then used for functional practice and pleasure derived from that action, the individual engages in practice play.

Symbolic Play

For Piaget, symbolic play demonstrates characteristics of qualitative thought processes reflective of the stage of verbal and intuitive thought of the concrete stage of intellectual development (2 through 7/8 years of age). Symbolic compared to practice play, implies actions in the absense of objects--i.e., representation of an object that is not presently observed (Piaget, 1962). The child in symbolic play compares a given object and its imagined referent and through the comparison assimilation is distorted. For Piaget, representation begins when actions, first acquired, are taken out of context and again reproduced at the sight of the original object. And, then they are reproduced in the content of other objects. Here, images or symbols result from body adjustments to an object in its absence. The image evolves but without complete overt movement as in the initial action used to establish it. " . . . These interiorizations stand for the object, as concrete symbols, and later they act as signs indicating or signifying the object." (Millar, 1971, p. 55). Language, a socially derived and readily available set of signifiers based on words, assists this process. However, language is not essential to it.

A child, who acquires driving schemas by helping mother drive her car, now reproduces these actions out of context in a play activity at the sight of the mother's car (the original referent), and then reproduces these same driving actions at the sight of a miniature toy truck and other objects. In symbolic play, symbolization, pretense, and make believe are possible.

From a developmental point of view, Piaget sees the evolution of representation originating in sensorimotor play, then proceeding heirarchically to symbol "in action without representation" and finally to symbol "in action

with representation". Piaget feels the symbol subordinates but does not replace sensorimotor practice actions in the symbolic play.

Symbolic or imaginative play involving the make believe or the element, ". . . as if . . .", are readily used. However, symbolic like practice play is purely assimilative. Repetition and organization of thought in terms of symbols and images already mastered are operationalized through imaginative play. The child reproduces anything and everything of importance in symbolic play. The reproduction itself is a distortion of reality since the child makes no effort to adapt his or her actions to environmental milieu.

Symbolic play is highly personal and idiosyncratic because it originates within the child's egocentric thinking processes of a particular intellectual stage. It is based upon specific images and symbols that the individual uses, and upon particular experiences he has had. As the child continues to engage in symbolic play and has further experiences in the environment, it becomes well organized and progressively more elaborated. With more detail in symbolic play, thinking structures are modified and expanded. As a result of this process, symbolic play takes on more and more realism and the child's actions slowly begin to match "reality". The individual makes efforts at adaptive responses through highly complex symbolic play. In parallel fashion, the child displays greater socially adaptive responses, which inevitably require less and less distortion of reality, and subsequently decrease the use of imaginative substitutes for symbols.

Play Activities with Rules

Play activities with rules reflect thinking structures in abstract form and represent high levels of operational intelligence characteristic of the children's intellectual development from ages 7 through 11/12 and

upward. While sensorimotor practice and symbolic play decrease as the individual gets older, play activities with rules after age 11 or 12 remain and develop throughout life. In adults play activities with rules can be observed in card games such as poker, sport activities, and games for example, checkers, chess, and many others. Individual and highly subjective symbols characterizing imaginative play, change through collective organization of individual and group cooperation, and become symbolic activities of socialized beings.

In games with rules, children acquire spontaneous regularity--i.e., throwing from the same spot, batting from the same spot, kicking from the same line. These more advanced play activities also reflect interiorized notions of obligation that have been acquired through assimilative actions of a particular group. Consistent with Piaget's ideas of spontaneous regularity and obligation, individuals may give themselves the "game plan" or the rule based upon knowing other rules. Violations of play activities with rules also carry sanctions of a collective complete with "warnings" and in a more extreme form "exclusion" or "expulsion" from the group game. These rules have not been borrowed from statutes of an athletic association, nor do they represent compilations of legal documents, but have been designed and tailor-made for a purpose and fit a specific play activity. As might be expected, thinking structures and symbols employed in play activities with rules become more logical and show greater objectivity.

Play activities with rules, like symbolic play, contain some motor elements of sensorimotor practice. These motor elements are readily observable in all play activities with rules such as games of marbles or competitive games. However, codes of honor, based on group activities, replaces symbolic

play of the child. For Piaget, play activities with rules are still characterized by assimilative responses rather than adaptive actions. Games with rules are not equivalent to intellectual adaptation to reality because they serve essentially to legitimize the child's satisfaction with his or her previous achievements (Piaget, 1962).

Sensorimotor practice play, symbolic games, and play activities with rules evolve and develop in successive and heirarchical fashion. There is another aspect of symbolic play discussed by Piaget. It is neither successive nor heirarchical but is regarded as a transitional phase.

Constructive and Creative Play

Piaget (1962) recognizes another classification of play activity he calls constructive and creative play. From a developmental view, this play provides a transition from assimilative to more adaptive actions and can occur at any time or any age level. Piaget argues that these play activities are not a stage in themselves. Instead, these play activities demonstrate internal transformations of symbolic to more adaptive representations. As a transitional category, Piaget sees construction and creative play fitting in between sensorimotor and symbolic play and also " . . . between the two and adaptive activity . . . which is at the same time practical and representational" (Piaget, 1962, p. 109).

For instance, when a child really carves or hammers a car from wooden and metal materials, symbolic play evolves into real imitation--as the final product. In another example, the child builds a house with actual bricks and blocks. The building involves sensorimotor practice and symbolic play, but the final completed product--the real house--requires spontaneous intelligent activity and in a strict developmental sense is not play. The actions the

child uses to build the house or car and complete final and "real" products in these examples require spontaneous adaptive actions not pure assimilative responses characteristic of sensorimotor, symbolic, or play activities with rules.

For Piaget, the child in these examples, transcends the realms of symbolic play and play activities for that of imitation and work. Constructive and creative play becomes a phase or position between play and intelligent work or between play and imitation. These transitional and adaptive actions can be called "occupations" and are the "boundary class" between play and non-play activities. Essentially, they provide the continuity between the child's play and his work.

Prologue

With justifications at nondescriptive and intuitive levels, Piaget's ideas about play can be used to support play as a viable part of all good programs for young children. The rationale for Piaget's view of play has a number of strengths and advantages that nondescriptive and intuitively-based arguments lack.

1. Play and playing is put into context of evolving and developing thought structures of human organisms.
2. Play is a natural yet developmental action of all human beings from the infant, adolescent to the adult.
3. The categories, used to group play and play activities, are based upon characteristics of evolving thought structures used in the playing process.
4. Observations of children at play can be used to determine the levels of inteliectual development--sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete, or formal thought.

5. Play is initially dependent upon the child's action and manipulation of concrete materials for maximum benefit and potential.
6. Play is based on an interactive effect of the child acting and being acted upon by the environment. It varies from intellectually adaptive actions in degree of assimilative to accommodative actions and reactions made by the child.
7. Play serves to facilitate and provides a firm foundation for the growth of logical thought structures.
8. Play assists the growth processes of intellectual, social, psychomotor and emotional.
9. The relationship between play and work depends upon the roles of assimilation to accommodation.
10. Practice or excercise play is viewed as assimilative actions that are repeated for the pleasure they yield in "being the cause".
11. Symbolic play is make believe and pretend and distorts assimilation. It is idiosyncratic, and serves individual or groups of children.
12. Play activities with rules are not included in symbolic play because the former is a product of particular social groups while the latter is child specific.
13. Constructive and creative play is viewed as a boundary or transitional phase of play.

There are a number of problems in Piaget's view of play. Particularly, more information and research evidence is needed about the growth of logical thought structures, and assimilative and accommodative actions. However, Piaget's rationale for the importance of play as a viable part of kindergarten curriculum can still be used independently or in conjunction with nondescriptive or intuitive justifications pending more research evidence.

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